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Second Thoughts Surface on Mengele

In the face of a U.S. pronouncement that Josef Mengele is dead, we had the temerity last June to suggest that the notorious Nazi war criminal might be alive and thumbing his nose at the world. Our suspicions have been heightened by intriguing reports.

First, let us concede that the evidence of the death-camp doctor's demise is impressive. Forensic experts have examined bones from a Brazilian grave and concluded that they are Mengele's remains. Their findings are supported by letters and other documents provided by Mengele's family, plus the testimony of those who purportedly knew him in Brazil.

Yet, some of our intelligence sources are not convinced. The medical evidence, they say, is cumulative but not specific. The documents and testimony don't always jibe with other, more authoritative evidence.

They can't shake off the tantalizing suspicion that the evidence of Mengele's drowning in 1979 could have been manufactured as part of an elaborate hoax to throw off his pursuers.

Just as several governments were closing in on Mengele, with millions of dollars in reward money on his head, the 1979 grave suddenly gave up its bones. The timing was too convenient to satisfy some Mengele hunters. Besides, they say, he was an accomplished swimmer.

Now here are the latest reports:

- The Israelis have refused to close their file on Mengele and have sent an expert back to Brazil to review the evidence.

- A source close to the Israeli investigation confided to us that the Israelis have obtained a 1982 letter in Mengele's handwriting. If the letter can be authenticated, he could not have drowned in 1979.

- Both Israeli and American intelligence agencies have picked up reports of Mengele sightings in Paraguay in the 1980s. The latest was an August 1984 CIA dispatch that "unconfirmed sightings of Mengele were reported in Paraguayan border cities."

- The CIA also learned from members of Paraguayan dictator Alfred Stroessner's staff that "Mengele sent correspondence, including Christmas cards, to them from Portugal until late 1980." He reportedly traveled back and forth between Portugal and Brazil.

- Some Israeli authorities, according to a source who has talked to them, believe Mengele is alive today, hiding in Paraguay.

- Secret CIA cables, meanwhile, report that Mengele has been trafficking in drugs under the alias "Enrique Waldman" or "Henrique Wollman."

- Confidential File: The recent Soviet-British retaliatory "spy" expulsions have stirred up long-festering gripes by eager beavers in the U.S. Foreign Service; most are in the State Department, but there are also specialists from Defense, Commerce and Agriculture stationed at U.S. embassies. They're all aware that assignment to the "glamor" posts in the Soviet bloc is the best way to climb the career ladder, but for years they've been complaining that the staffs of these embassies are overloaded with CIA personnel.